

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

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In my senior year, as I was good with words and almost nothing else, I talked a girl down from a window ledge who'd been dumped by the editor of our college newspaper. I'd seen her riding a bicycle around campus in a dirndl-type blouse; my standard outfit, an over-large sweatshirt. We were both very ungirly girls, not the kind that does things with their hair, spending hours in front of a mirror or shopping for style. We both decried white broadcloth shirts that needed ironing and circle pins, whether worn on the left or the right, advertising virginity or not depending. The college, reputed to be a party school, was, at the time, dangerously close to losing its certification, burying us with a workload of studies designed to have two out of three flunk out. The thought of going home to our respective mothers as flunkees created a magnetic bond (though her father provided his family with a butler and mine sold used cars).

The hippies who wouldn't be caught dead in penny loafers were grinding up morning glory seeds to get high in the Student Union. The Twist was just coming into fashion. Salacious passages from D.H. Lawrence and Anais Nin were being underlined and passed around the dorm. Men were not allowed beyond the ground floor. On weekends, I had a job, a job I could have done in my sleep, announcing callers on the reception desk intercom for 50 cents an hour. (Miss Jones, you have a visitor!). By curfew, there were more drunks in the reception area than the Bowery, lolling on couches, puking into wastebaskets and rearranging clothing that had been put on backwards. With the sexual revolution blooming all around me with other girls partying all night, coming back "pinned" and deliriously happy, mostly, I developed into a watcher of people, a misanthropic depressive, secretly yearning to break free from the paralyzing strictures of a life unlived. When people ask what I was doing when JFK was assassinated, that's what I was doing--sleeping, waking up to find the entire college deserted.

There were only two black men on campus and one of them, an animal husbandry major, took up the guitar. After our starchy communal meals, we sat sit on the steps of what was called the commons and listen, over and over, to the only song in his repertoire: (Peanut, Peanut Butter). Later, he became world famous, known as The Grandfather of Jazz.

The other black man, Freddy Lewis, was in one of my classes. It was a beautiful thing every Saturday to see this Adonis running across the field, football tucked under one of his massive arms, others dropping like flyweights in his wake. After he made all the touchdowns, his team mates would pound all over his body, practically kiss him, he was such a hero. By his sophomore year, he had 3 pro bids! But poor Freddy could barely read and write, having been passed along all through high school, and his scholarship was in jeopardy, so I offered to tutor him. When he told me he was not allowed to dance with any of the girls at the Saturday nights frat parties and was terribly lonely, I was livid, accompanying him to Kappa Sig, without understanding the ramifications. The guitar-playing guy had a white girlfriend, why not Freddy?

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Kids can be pretty mean. Girls would quit talking when I entered a room. Boys in the Student Union would elbow each other and point. I'd become a pariah! But lest I appear self-aggrandizing, despite having a raging case of acne and a boyfriend at home, I confess to a crush on the football team captain, a blonde, blue-eyed darling with a girlfriend whose name I still remember as Mina. The coup d'etat came in the library one night when he approached, shiny white teeth when he smiled, holding a poison pen letter someone had left in his locker.

"Do you know what you're doing?" he asked, voice dripping with reprobation, filling me with shame. It was a watershed experience.

In any event, I didn't have a total nervous breakdown though I couldn't concentrate on my studies, couldn't sleep without nightmares, my cumulative average beginning to sink lower than dirt. I remember sobbing inconsolably, head in my lap, at the end of a movie where Shirley MacLaine was dumped by a young Frank Sinatra in *Some Came Running*. When the lights came on and everyone else in the auditorium was gone, I knew I was in trouble.

. After graduation we corresponded. She had beautiful, firm handwriting having taken a course in calligraphy; my chicken scratching, a disgrace to the Palmer method. Our letters crossed, chronicling experiences, both high and low: my nose job after the divorce, her watching psychic surgeries in Brazil, my primal therapy, her EST and TM with Sanskrit mantras, her climbing Machu Pichu or walking on coals, Fire Island for her during the summer, Cape Cod for me.

During one brief period in D.C., she had an experience I didn't envy, chumming with Timothy Leary's acolytes, movie stars, and some of our favorite writers, doing LSD and psilocybin mushrooms, with the FBI confiscating her files. Privy to her sex stories, some not to my taste, she careened through life, the freest of free spirits while I was happy to just stay out of trouble, which wasn't always easy. My sexual appetites, remarkably plebian, compared to hers, led me to congress with a Daoist, with whom I found a modicum of peace in my forties.

Once I visited her in New York at her parent's, after one of my personal catastrophes. And once she visited me at my own home in Massachusetts. Our birthdays came close together in November and she always sent me a card and a small gift, a pad of stickum-notes with my name embossed or a tiny lipstick case containing a sliver of mirror. One winter she also invited me to visit her family's villa in Mexico, but I couldn't afford the air fare.

Finally settling down, she bought an entire mountain in Vermont, and had a customized house built on top with a truck garden behind it, her pride and joy. The house was round because when she was little, her mother would always make her sit in a corner when she was naughty. As I came through the front door, the smell of new wood hit me. Floors, walls, cathedral ceilings all made of varnished pine. Everything in the kitchen, squeaky clean. The Persian rugs were still rolled up in brown paper, lying against a fireplace. She was on the phone, long distance, with someone

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who had borrowed money and having a hard time repaying. A farmer, I think, whose crops hadn't come in because of drought or too much rain.

Even though we were in our fifties, by then, we were both still the same plain Janes we'd always been. I brought her a gift of a black blouse, sheer and frivolous, which she said she loved as she always wore black. Ironically, we both had changed our names in an effort to make the turns in our lives better and we both had joined Mensa. She had never married and now relied upon a caretaker living close by. At least I had a son, albeit married and gone. He was there for an emergency if my car broke down, or if I needed a ride from a medical procedure. Since nobody would rent to dogs when I moved back from Florida and I was too stubborn to put them down, I was living in my Cadillac; she was on top of her world. The mountain was making money thanks to a reforestation government grant.

And she showed me such a good time. We talked long into the night with plenty to catch up on. On a bleak, cloudy day, we went out on a little motorboat, riding almost to Montpelier, stopping on the way back after she spotted a rare group of mushrooms a few yards from shore in a thicket, picking them with a small knife to bring to one of the culinary schools later. There were seven culinary schools in the area and every night we ate for free the most delicious food, prepared by students. The dessert table at one was amazing with artistic creations the students had designed: a small merry-go-round, carved from a cantelope, for example, with grapes as heads for the individual riders, a work of art only a Barbarian would dismember. How I wished I had brought along a camera. After we finished our entrees, at every meal, she took out a dandy little tape recorder, held it to her chin, and proceeded to verbally dissect every morsel of the gustatory repast, so that the teachers could grade.

Once a month, she said, she had to drive to New York where she'd been living for years to collect her mail and pay the bills. It must have been on one of those rides that she was killed. I didn't know this until last year, when the usual birthday card didn't arrive, and I Googled to find a Buddhist ceremony on top of the mountain with her ashes. The money willed to Doctors Without Borders.

I Googled again today hoping to connect with a family member to pay my respects, to find the Buddhist ceremony post missing, but Wiki had her name listed in a lengthy biography of a gay rights activist, who died of Aids, having been gang-raped in prison. He evidently turned bi-sexual when he fell in love with my friend. Those of us who feel unloveable, find it, I guess, in the strangest of places.

Mine was Harold, a heavy equipment operator, with a head of springing gold curls and a brain like a turnip's. I caught him on the phone telling a girlfriend he was after my money! This must have been before he threw a chair through a window at my mother's motel where he was responsible for keeping in good repair the pool heating machinery. Luckily, my mother was out of town at the time. My brother and I paid for a replacement window and never told her. But when she got back, she was so insistent, so adamant that Harold wasn't good enough, she forced me to take a trip with her to Jamaica with my little boy who was four. I had this time share and if I didn't use it, it was a sin. Mother grew up in the Depression when people would come into her father's restaurant only to ask for a cup of hot

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water, add ketchup and drink it for soup.

We arrived in Montego Bay, me juggling this huge box, containing old clothes and a big box of Tide, my college friend intended for me to deliver to some needy people in St. Ann's Bay. Evidently soap was a precious commodity and packages at the airport were commonly rifled for the big orange containers of Tide. We checked into a 5 star hotel which we were getting free because of the time share.

On the first night on the verandah, with romantic candles flickering on the starched white linen-covered table, balmy breezes on my bare shoulders, my back to the beautiful white beach, when a judge, with a beard and pince-nez glasses on his pointy nose, invited himself to join us. Mother was delighted, kneeling me under the table every now and then in her excitement. Her dearest hope was for me to find a husband so she didn't have to worry I would starve. It was a well known fact that most people who turned to the arts, dancing or music, ended up starving in a garret, or blowing their brains out like Hemingway.

I was still in love with Harold whose trim body shined in the Florida sun as if it were oiled, muscles rippling. While I was cleaning up to eighteen bathtubs, eighteen toilets and eighteen sinks, when we had check-outs, chasing those short curls everywhere, Harold would smoke pot and read the newspapers from cover to cover. "How are you going to learn anything, if you don't read?" he would harangue, berating me because I refused to walk on the beach which was right across the street from the motel. To this day, when I scan personal ads, I still hate men that want to walk on the beach and I hated hairy men too, no matter how smart. So much for the judge and my décolletage he must have been attracted to.

"Don't you read the newspapers?" the judge asked, once our dinner was settling nicely. Nicely, but briefly. He continued: "The Communists killed twenty people in Kingston last night and burned down a nursing home. Didn't you know this country is in the middle of a war?"

We should have checked out the very next day, but my mother was a bit of a tightwad and it would have meant we had to pay extra for the air fare instead of using our prepaid round trip tickets. In a hotel with two hundred rooms, there were only eight other families. We saw the same faces, night after night, in the dining room, which was quiet as a morgue except for the clinking of tines on the china and occasional sizzling of a flambe. Everybody looked unhappy. Even the outdoor Tiki bar was closed as well as any attractions like river rafting or horseback riding on the beach. We sat by the pool with a lone musician entertaining half-heartedly, hoping for tips, no doubt. And the only other person to talk to was the major domo, Neville. One night he took me to a nightclub where I was the only white woman there. To get to my room at the end of the night, I had to walk down this long, lonely corridor, terrified some Communist would leave me for dead.

The box had to be delivered. Neville said it would be dangerous for two white women alone. So we rented a car with Neville as the driver, stopping along the way at Ocho Rios, to see the falls. They were beautiful, a small version of our Niagra. My son, who had been cooped up nearly all the week, reading comic books, decided, unwisely, to scamper some

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twenty feet up before Neville was able to rescue him. It was a close call. An hour later, we arrived at a small conclave, higher in the mountains, to deliver the box. Chickens, running amuck, scattered as we drove up. In a small wooden house, a shack, really, we saw an older woman on the floor, intent on plucking chicken feathers from a dead chicken. She evidently had Elephantiasis, huge pendulums of flesh in her lap, barely covered by a torn T shirt on which could be seen the remnants of a Bob Marley logo.

"Oh, no, mon" she said, in that delightful sing-song rhythm I was becoming accustomed to. "The box goes to my son, but he isn't here."

Neville got the directions and we continued on, higher and higher for about an hour, until we came to a clearing where a weathered, ancient house loomed like Wuthering Heights in a Jane Eyre nightmare. It seemed to be splintering before our eyes, grey as if it never had been painted. Out of the house came bounding the most magnificent specimen of manhood, bare-chested, with muscles so bulging, they made Harold's, back in St. Pete, look scrawny as beef jerky. On his head were nearly two feet high of dreadlocks, crowning his forehead and his ears, like a lion's mane. His handsome face was wreathed in a smile. "Welcome, welcome," he announced, arms spread wide. "Any friend of J.D.'s is a friend of mine!"

Neville carried the box into the surreal two story dwelling, with my mother and I and my son, following, aghast to see a goat inside. There didn't seem to be any furniture or rugs and no electric poles outside, just a bare-naked living room, wall to wall nothing. The Rastafarian introduced us to his wife, a woman about twenty-five, tall and stately, wearing a simple cotton dress, washed out of color. Her hair was without lustre and her face was as if it had never seen the sun. "She has seven children," said our host, proudly. Seven children. No wonder there was such a glaze on her eyes, almost as if she were dead. Zombie eyes. Very scary.

Then he introduced his brother who looked about thirty-five with leathery lines in his face and a missing front tooth, wearing jeans and boots. In coloring and features he resembled his brother, the wild man. We all shook hands. My son was more interested in the goat, of course.

"But come, come," said the man, urgently, taking my hand. "You'll want to see our orchard." Not wanting to be rude, I let him lead me out the back door and down some rickety steps. My mother stayed behind to try and chat up the wife, I guess. I was very nervous. People disappear all the time. Walking slowly through a copse in back of the house, (thinking death every minute), we came to what he had brought me to see. In row after neat row, stood some six foot tall marijuana plants, shiny and green in the summer sun.

"Amazing," I said. What else could I say? It's not like bales of brown "square grouper" weren't being dropped by plane into the waters near where I lived. Every fisherman I knew in Florida was stinking rich, driving fancy cars and spending money like water at Harold's Rod and Gun Club or the bar I preferred, because it was less noisy, Mahuffer's, further up the beach, where the jukebox played Why Don't We Get Drunk and Screw and ladies' dirty underwear flopped in your face, if you weren't careful. The owner decorated with just about anything somebody else might throw away and rumor had it when realtors approached him for the

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valuable land, he would chase them out with a shotgun. I hope they never tear the bar down.

The brother took a huge blunt, wrapped in newspaper, out of his shirt's pocket, on the way back to the house. "This is a spliff," he said, without ceremony, lighting the doobie and handing it to me. "We call it the weed of wisdom. You won't find anything this good back in the states. We want to give you some to sell and take back. No charge. Maybe you'd like to do a little business. We're poor and really need the money."

I still didn't want to be rude. Just when I took a puff, my mother's head popped out a window. "Let's go," she said, in no uncertain terms. "I'm ready." My mother did not approve of recreational smoking, sex without marriage, anything not Christian. As far as she was concerned, any profound mystical and spiritual experience could be found in the Bible, which she carried with her always, even on vacation.

"I'm coming," I answered, smoke inadvertently leaking from my lips though I tried to hold my breath. The newspaper did not agree with my lungs and I was nearly choking. There was going to be hell to pay if she noticed.

"Sorry," I managed to say to my hosts, recovering my wits nicely. "I'd like to help. But if I go to jail, there is no one to take care of my little boy." I could hardly wait to get back to Neville and hit the road.